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Dossier

The Work of Zhang Longxi and the Fallacy of Cultural Incommensurability*

João Cezar de Castro Rocha[1]

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Abstract:

In this paper, I propose that Zhang Longxi's contributions to literary studies, in general, and to comparative literature, in particular, offer a much-needed starting point to conceive of a new theoretical framework, which allows us to overcome the predicaments implied in an all-Western theorization.

Keywords*: Zhang Longxi; Cross-cultural reading; Literary Hermeneutics; East and West; Comparative poetics.*

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The entire dataset that supports the results of this study has been published in the article itself.

Introduction

In this paper, I propose that Zhang Longxi's contributions to literary studies, in general, and to comparative literature, in particular, offer a much-needed starting point to conceive of a new theoretical framework, which allows us to overcome the predicaments implied in Western-centric theorization. This is still the dominant paradigm even (or especially) in non-hegemonic cultural contexts, and challenging this paradigm is one of the aims of this paper. In other words, the globalized world should entice us to come up with a truly plural and polycentric field of literary studies, or a polycentric and plural notion of Humanities at large. Instead of limiting ourselves to a predictable one-way road, in which we always welcome theories, methodologies and names stemming from one and only source, we must encourage ourselves to engage in new dialogues, establishing cultural and intellectual bridges that are yet to be fully

[1]Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.
E-mail: jccr123@yahoo.com.br

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explored. The time has come to *take the road less travelled by*, following the steps that Zhang Longxi has been paving since the publication of his first book in 1992, *The Tao and the Logos. Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*. His work may guide us in the *selva selvaggia* of a planetary culture, which threatens to reduce the diversity of cultures worldwide. Erich Auerbach identified acutely this predicament. In the final sentences of the last chapter of his masterpiece the immediate future looked somber, in the annunciation of "the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification (Auerbach, 2003, p. 553)." In other words, Auerbach anticipated the dissolution of *Weltliteratur*, as the utopic promise of an all-encompassing method of assimilating differences, replaced by the brutal standardization of cultural manifestations. In his "testament," Auerbach was not shy in revealing his harsh appraisal on the state of affairs in the 1950s:

> Should mankind succeed in withstanding the shock of so mighty process of concentration – for which the spiritual preparation has been poor – then man will have to accustom himself to existence in a standardized world, to a single literary culture, only a few literary languages, and perhaps even a single literary language. And herewith the notion of *Weltliteratur* would be at once realized and destroyed.[1]

[1] Erich Auerbach (1969, p. 3). There is a serious conceptual mistake in the translation of the title, "Philologie der Weltliteratur," which should read "Philology of the *Weltliteratur*." Auerbach's article was originally published in 1953.

Zhang Longxi's theoretical work offers an alternative to this nostalgic perspective. In order to demonstrate this potential, two books will be privileged in this paper, *Taos and the Logos* and *Unexpected Affinities*.

"Je est un autre"

In this paper a pride of place will be given to the notion of "the fallacy of cultural incommensurability" as a proper way to approach Zhang's understanding of the deep meaning of cross-cultural studies. Calling into question this naturalized notion of how different cultures are, and thus how untranslatable they remain to each other, has always been an obsession in Zhang's efforts throughout his career. In his own words:

> Let me end this chapter by quoting the famous lines of the great poet Goethe, whose *West-östlicher Divan* expresses the vision since Leibniz of the close ties and mutual understanding of the East and the West:
>
> Wer sich selbst und andere kennt,
> Wird auch hier erkennen:
> Orient und Okzident]
> Sind nicht mehr zu trennen.
>
> He who knows himself and others
> Will also here see:
> The Orient and Occident
> Separate shall never be. (Zhang, 2007, p. 23).

Let me remark that the line *He who knows himself and others* may well be read as the mirror of Zhang's own intellectual calling – a compass to his fruitful trajectory. We would like to propose an adjustment: *He who knows himself because also knows others*. Ultimately, Zhang's aim is the same of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, when he clarified his aesthetic project in a famous 1871 letter written to Georges Izambard, his teacher at the Lycée: *Je est un autre* – "I is another."[2] Deliberately Rimbaud has not followed the rules of grammar – *Je suis an autre* (I am another) Rather, the young poet invented a unique *way of worldmaking* – to recall Nelson Goodman's famous essay – rendered possible by his aesthetic perception of reality. "I *is* another" could be a synthetic definition of Zhang Longxi's theoretical approach. The Rimbaudian "I" does not remain identical to itself, once he expands his horizons by incorporating the constitutive presence of the other – "I *is*"; no longer a mere "I am." At the same time, and this is a decisive element in Zhang's reflection, the "I" does not become the other, but remains an "I" whose eyes are now wide-open due to the acknowledgment of alterity as an indispensable part of a dialectical definition of the Self. Zhang's insight also evokes a manifesto published in 1928 by a Brazilian avant-gardist artist, Oswald de Andrade. In his "Manifesto Antropófago" (Cannibalist Manifesto), he stated provocatively: "I am only concerned with what is not mine. Law of Man. Law of the cannibal (Andrade, 1991, p. 38).

[2] The letter was written on 13 May 1871. In: Arthur Rimbaud. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Antoine Adam (ed.). Paris: Gallimard, 1972, p. 248-249

We could also say: "Zhang Longxi's Law"! This creative and tense oscillation between Self and Other implies a two-way road of overwhelming power, and it is from this centrality of alterity in any artistic and intellectual endeavor that springs the strength of the perspective inaugurated by *The Tao and the Logos*. Let me illustrate the strength of this perspective by bringing into our discussion the work of Zhang Longxi's master, Qian Zhongshu. I am referring to his 1962 essay "On Reading *Laokoon*":

> Recently, a number of our literary theorists have developed an interest in Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le Comédien* (The Paradox of Acting), and have written numerous articles discussing this work. (…) Diderot's theory causes us to look again at this old Chinese saying and to treat it with an increased respect, fully conscious now of its profound implications. At the same time, because this old Chinese saying would seem to lend distant support to Diderot's stance, we recognize that his theory does not derive simply from the individual prejudices and paradoxes of a single European. (Qian, 2014, p. 80-81)

A fundamental phenomenon is taking place here: Professor Qian's thoughtful analysis of Diderot prompted him to reevaluate his own tradition, seen with fresh eyes; a remarkable intellectual achievement made possible precisely because the notion of cultural incommensurability is a fallacy. Not only that! After all, by bringing into dialogue the French 18th century culture and the Chinese much older literary tradition, Professor Qian subtly warns that the question on any

sort of "anxiety of influence" should rather be strategically abandoned by European and North American scholars and authors.[3]

[3] Of course, I am referring to Harold Bloom's 1973 essay *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry.*

> (As I also hope to have demonstrated by bringing together a French poet from the 19th century, a Brazilian avant-garde artist from the 20th century and a Chinese literary theorist from the 21st century.)

In this horizon, I should mention Zhang's latest publication: *World Literature as Discovery. Expanding the World Literary Canon*, a collection of essays evocative of his 2015 *From Comparison to World Literature* insofar as in both books there is a common enterprise, namely, the expansion of current theoretical and critical limits precisely through a provocative incorporation of works beyond the Western-oriented trend of literary studies. In conclusion, Zhang reminds us:

> From Goethe to Tagore and to Borges, we hear the wise and urgent admonitions against self-enclosure and the narrow view of the world as isolated and fundamentally different literatures and cultures, East and West, North and South. Their cosmopolitan vision encourages us to be open to all human expressions in the world wherever we find them, to discover the largely yet-unknown literary works from non-Western and "minor" European traditions and bring them to global circulation for universal understanding and appreciation. (Zhang, 2024, p. 157).

Let me also clarify the reading method I propose in this paper, which will guide my presentation of both *Taos and the Logos* and *Unexpected Affinities*. I resort to the method of "thick description," as developed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his 1973 celebrated book *Interpretation of Cultures*. Geertz developed the reflection initially unfolded by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle in his 1968 essay "The Thinking of Thoughts: What is 'Le Penseur' Doing?". Ryle, established the well-known distinction between two gestures that ultimately could be seen as an identical action, and Geertz appropriated the distinction:

> Consider, he says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, "phenomenalistic" observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. (Geertz, 1973, p. 6).

A thin description would content itself with the literal account of the physical gesture: a contraction of the eyelids; whereas a thick description would strive to contextualize both actions, finding significant differences where otherwise only an identical action would be perceived. The only way of accomplishing such a hermeneutical task is to embed

the gesture within a cultural context, going beyond the sameness of the physicality of the contraction of the eyelids to discover the uniqueness of each gesture. In other words, thick description seeks to understand the gesture of the contraction of the eyelids through the reconstruction of a web of meanings able to produce significant differences. The mechanical gesture thus becomes an interpretable action.[4] This is the reading method I will resort to in my reading of Zhang Longxi's theorization.[5]

As we will see, Zhang's theorization in *The Tao and the Logos* depends heavily on the fundamental distinction proposed by Martin Heidegger between the concepts of *equal or identical* and the *same*. The search for the sameness not despite but precisely because of differences may be seen as an apt summary of Zhang's comparative poetics.

Having clarified how we are going to read Zhang Longxi's work, let us move into reading *The Taos and the Logos*.

The Tao and the Logos

Zhang Longxi's first book, *The Taos and the Logos*, already contains the intellectual program unfolded in his productive and relevant trajectory. He started by a bold statement: "hermeneutics has implications that are truly universal, it is not and cannot be limited to one particular realm of study; to one culture or one tradition (Zhang, 1992, p. IX)." In the early 1990s, when the *Zeitgeist* was dominated by the (almost obsessive) search for differences and discontinuities, Longxi was not shy in unveiling the *radical difference* of his own project:

> This is of special importance at the present because the goal of this East-West comparative study is unabashedly the finding of sameness despite profound cultural differences, while in so many contemporary or postmodern Western theories are predicated on the assumption of cultural, ethnic, gender or some other difference. (…) and attempt to go beyond the Self and the Other in an effort to attain to an expanded horizon of experience and knowledge. (Zhang, 1992, p. XVII).

It is only possible to go *beyond the Self and the Other* because Zhang's philosophical understanding of literature as well as of literary hermeneutics allowed him to go *beneath* what is common between East and West – and for that matter common to all human communication. In other words, whoever conveys a thought must resort to linguistic devices, and whoever does it, incurs a set of epistemological dilemmas and aesthetic possibilities. Zhang's way of facing this challenge consists in proposing a comparison not between structures of meaning already articulated, but between ways of structuring meaning not yet fully articulated. Because of this approach, Zhang has performed thorough and insightful analyses of concepts and metaphors present in both Eastern and Western traditions; after all, "(…) metaphors are not just a figure of speech but are *basic to any structure of language*, and […] they often provide revealing illustrations of how the mind works in articulating

[4] I have employed this method to scrutinize the complete works of the author of *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. See, João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Machado de Assis. Towards a Poetics of Emulation*. Translated by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015. For a description of the method, see p. xxxii-xxxvi.

[5] Of course, I am not being original! Read the following quote: "In this book I present piecemeal attempts at the thick description of classical Chinese philosophy. (…) This book is not about whether Chinese philosophy is philosophy but about how Chinese philosophy is Chinese." Paul R. Goldin. "Introduction." *After Confucius. Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017, p. 2-3.

sensibilities and experiences (Zhang, 1998, p. 9, my emphasis)." This dimension of Zhang Longxi's work has been keenly synthesized by Qian Suoqiao while relating his achievements to the legacy of his master, Qian Zhongshu[6]: "In his critical engagement with contemporary Western theory, Zhang Longxi inherits and exemplifies the quintessential traits of modern Chinese scholarly tradition (Qian, 2015, p. 9)."

Beneath and beyond: Zhang Longxi has broadened both the methodology of literary studies and the concept of world literature, and in doing so he brought East and West together in an unprecedented manner.

Preface as a Manifesto

Let us then move into our thick description of the "Preface" to *The Tao and the Logos*.[7] It should be read as a sort of manifesto, which contains and announces most of Zhang Longxi's future concerns. I will provide an initial critical vocabulary as well as define the main forces of his theoretical endeavor. Zhang's project entails a fresh consideration of the history of "hermeneutics (…) considered in the perspective of East-West comparative poetics" (p. IX). What does he understand by *comparative poetics*? Let us listen to the theorist: "the study of critical and theoretical issues shared by the East and West" (p. IX). In other words, regardless of cultural differences, there would be possible to find common "themes" in contexts as diverse from one another as, for instance, China and France, China and Brazil. Then, we stumble upon another keyword, *theme*, defined in the following way: "By 'themes' I mean certain problems of understanding to both Chinese and Western traditions" (p. XIII).

We have taken a step further. Comparative poetics will not be exclusively concerned with rhetorical common places, literary genres, shared themes and so forth, for it is not meant primarily to be a matter of content; rather, its horizons privilege the perception that literary forms stage a deeper human condition as far as communication is concerned. In his words, "literary hermeneutics is not the self-enclosed particularity of each theme but its broad theoretical implications beyond the enclosure" (p. XIII).

Zhang's effort, indeed, implies that, within the field of hermeneutics, "that is, the relationship between language and interpretation as it has been conceived in the Western tradition and in classical Chinese poetics" (p. XII), a pride of place will be given to a particular branch: "The use of literary hermeneutics lies rather in deepening our perception of the workings of language and our experience of the art of literature" (p. XII). This approach helps to evidence the true nature of the universality Zhang claims for hermeneutics, namely, "the ever-present problems of language and interpretation" (p. XIII). If there are *ever-present problems*, regardless of cultural circumstances, then we are, by definition, involved with a universal problem.

Once more, however, we are not dealing here with a content-oriented universality, which would always be anachronistic, beyond time and out of place, for it would have to impose specific values as

[6] In his first book, Zhang acknowledged: "I feel encouraged by the example of Mr. Qian Zhongshu, whose work gives me guidance in bringing the East and West together, though his formidable knowledge and scholarly accomplishment I cannot emulate." Zhang Longxi. *The Taos and the Logos*. Op. cit., p. XVIII.

[7] Since I work very closely with Zhang's text, I will directly quote the pages of *The Taos and the Logos*.

if they were necessarily shared by everyone in variegated historical circumstances. This is precisely what has defined Eurocentrism in its indefatigable attempt to portray European history as universal and hierarchically superior to any other form of culture. Rather, Zhang Longxi is looking for common *problems* related to "the nature of language – its inherent metaphoricity, ambiguity and suggestiveness"; then, literary hermeneutics would explore "its implications for the author and the reader of a literary work" (p. XIII). In another formulation of the same predicament, we read: "Such study is theoretical only in the sense that it is an investigation of the extent to which the inadequacy and suggestiveness of verbal expressions influences both the writing of a literary work and its reading" (p. XII). This topic, as a matter of fact, may be seen as a structural element, present throughout *The Tao and the Logos*. In another passage, he had already addressed the centrality of this issue: "I am nevertheless more interested in rethinking the metaphorical nature of language, the inherent inadequacy and suggestiveness involved in the use of words as signs and symbols, and the implications of all these for the writing and reading of literature" (p. X). That is why, as he will claim later, "philosophy and literary hermeneutics are closely related, for the specific problems of literary interpretation are grounded in the nature of language and can be best understood in the larger framework of philosophical hermeneutics" (p. XIV).

> (Here, the works of Wolfgang Iser and Zhang Longxi come close together: both started with careful reconstructions of how meaning is literarily produced, received and above all decoded in several different ways to arrive at the philosophical implications of the uniqueness of the literary production of meaning.)

This is the starting point to Zhang's theorization, namely, if the very nature of language implies a radical ambiguity, so that neither the one who writes or talks may be assured that she will be alle to find the proper expression to convey her inner thoughts, nor the listener or the reader may be certain to have grasped what was meant, once the author herself dwells on the same uncertainty, then, communication is above all a map of potential misunderstandings and misapprehensions. But that is not to be seen as something inherently negative; ultimately, the reason why we must keep on dialoguing is precisely because we can never trust entirely in our ability to understand others and above all we can never take for granted that our message will be understood. Rather a world without misapprehensions and misunderstandings would be a world of absolute silence. The famous sentence by Samuel Beckett's 1983 *Worstward Ho!* comes to mind: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."[8]

This synthesis of Beckett's own aesthetic project helps us to move to the quest of proposing much larger and bolder grounds for comparison,[9]

[8] Samuel Beckett (1983, p. 7).

[9] I am alluding to the classic book by Harry Levin, *Grounds for Comparison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

the true aim of the intellectual drive behind *The Tao and the Logos*, which announced Zhang's intellectual project, as he acknowledged, "for my discussion of language and interpretation goes beyond the boundaries of the Western critical tradition" (p. XI). The consequences of such scope are decisive and embrace an entirely new program for literary studies:

> Indeed, insofar as Western theory dictates the way and terms in which critical discourse invariably speaks of the non-Western Other as pure difference, understanding of truly different, non-Western cultures and literatures is virtually impossible. Speaking in the voice of and for the Other, I would reject the designated role of pure difference and attempt to go beyond the Self and the Other in an effort to attain to an expanded horizon of experience and knowledge. (p. XVII).

The Self and the Other is another way of encapsulating the totality of Zhang's project. This existential pair also allows to underscore his main philosophical assumption: "(…) the hermeneutic phenomenon is ontologically constitutive of human life, (…) The relationship of the Self with regard to the Other, which manifests itself everywhere in life, already forms the context in which the hermeneutic problem arises" (p. IX). After all, "understanding and interpretation are not just philosophical categories designed for a purely theoretical interest; they are rather the immanent facts of life" (p. IX). This perspective necessarily "incorporates the non-Western (p. X)", which demands a unique methodology also proposed by Zhang Longxi.

Let us see how it unfolds.

First, a much-needed caution, "a theoretically informed study must put cultural traditions on an equal footing. In other words, a study in comparative poetics must not merely apply Western concepts and approaches to non-Western texts but must consider and examine theoretical issues from a critical perspective that incorporates both the East and the West" (p. XI). This is a central issue for contemporary literary studies and even Humanities at large. In this context, the fact that Zhang Longxi is a Chinese scholar is a happy circumstance, for, indeed, "the validity of comparative literature never comes so close to a real crisis as when the comparison involves East and West" (p. XI). The topic returns in his commentary on a famous passage of Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses*, when the French thinker resorts to Jorge Luis Borges equally famous "Chinese encyclopedia," which Foucault sees as the insurmountable Other, as an authentic litmus test of the inevitability of cultural incommensurability. In Zhang's critical appraisal: "What we find as the same may appear suspicious when the intercultural comparison involves the Chinese tradition, for it is not China the very symbol of cultural difference for the Western theoretical discourse?" (p. XVI).

> (Let us not even mention the fact that Michel Foucault refers to a "certain Chinese encyclopedia" without mentioning that it appears in a story entitled "The Analytical Idiom of John Wilkins," and that,

> in Borges's text, the Chinese model is not presented as "exotic," but indeed as an anthropological symptom of the human need to identify patterns that may render the chaotic multiplicity of life at least classifiable, that is, approachable.)

Therefore, any comparative study would find its limits or rather its potentiality in an approach that would actively try to bring together historical experiences as diverse as the one represented by the pair East and West. Proceeding with this approach, Zhang Longxi devised a special methodology: "In bringing together historically unrelated texts and ideas, I attempt to find a common ground on which Chinese and Western literatures can be understood as commensurable, even though their cultural and historical contexts are different" (p. XIV). Such a comparative method demands a special understanding and dealing with the time factor; it cannot simply be based on an ideal synchronicity of historical processes whose dynamics, because contingent to given historical periods, will necessarily look different and anachronistic to each other. Zhang comes up with a new idea:

> (…) a study of such correlations in cultures as drastically different as the Chinese and the Western precludes comparison in a chronological order. Many comparable ideas and concepts do not emerge at the same time in China and the West; thus comparisons and parallels in this book are not historically oriented but aim to identify some common themes in the critical understanding that have emerged at various moments in the East and the West. (p. XIII).

Zhang Longxi also felt compelled to justify his search for common ground through an insightful reading of Martin Heidegger's essay on the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Zhang will not look for what is equal or identical but rather for what, within difference, may be rescued as the "same." However, sameness within diversity: this is the goal of Zhang's theoretical endeavor. In his words, "This is of special importance at the present because the goal of the East-West comparative study is unabashedly the finding of sameness despite profound cultural differences" (p. XV). As we have seen, the *nature of language* and *understanding and interpretation* [as] *the immanent facts of life* provide theoretical and methodological foundation for Zhang Longxi's bold enterprise.

Let us now move into the second book I will read on this paper.

The fallacy of cultural incommensurability

Unexpected Affinities: *Reading across Cultures* is the outcome, as the author clarifies, "of the four Alexander Lectures I delivered at the University College, University of Toronto on 28 February and 1, 2 and 3 March 2005".[10] The occasion was a memorable one, not only given the prestige associated with it, but also because it represented "the first set of Alexander Lectures to discuss a wide range of texts from the

[10] Zhang Longxi. *Unexpected Affinities*: *Reading across Cultures*. Op. cit., p. IX. Since I work very closely with Zhang's text, I will directly quote the pages.

perspective of East-West studies" (p. XIII). Thus, an inaugural moment, whose meaning is yet to be fully uncovered.

In *Unexpected Affinities* Zhang carried further the project announced in *The Tao and the Logos* concerning the development of a theoretical framework able to overcome the epistemological limits he identified in cultural relativism, for, if different cultures are ultimately untranslatable to each other, the very idea of comparative studies would come to an unsurmountable impasse. As a work in progress, some topics present in *The Tao and the Logos* return and even certain quotes and literary examples are revisited in his 2007 book. Therefore, our initial task is to ask which new ideas and approaches are developed by Zhang Longxi.

The answer is twofold.

On the one hand, Zhang fully unfolded his critique of the *fallacy of cultural incommensurability*, the theme of the first chapter of *Unexpected Affinities*. This critique allowed him to explicit both from a theoretical and methodological standpoint the advantages brought by a systematic *reading across cultures* to the field of literary studies, and more particularly, following Zhang's own critical vocabulary, to the acknowledgment of the full potential of *literary hermeneutics*.

On the other hand, in *Unexpected Affinities* the common ground between East and West is discussed as it emerges in concrete acts of reading literary texts from Eastern and Western traditions. In other words, especially in chapters 2, 3 and 4, Zhang Longxi provides a wealth of literary examples, ranging from several centuries in an all-encompassing approach which offers a new methodology, which in *The Tao and the Logos* had not yet been so clearly outlined.

Let us then take a close look at the twofold movement put forward by Zhang Longxi. The main assumption of the hypothesis of cultural incommensurability is an allegedly "conceptual as well as linguistic untranslatability across cultures" (p. 5). And if that is the case, a dreadful consequence imposes itself: "the fundamental difference between the two [cultures] that rules out any common ground and the possibility of any meaningful comparison" (p. 5). In Zhang's words: "Without first facing the challenge of cultural incommensurability, it would be impossible to proceed to a discussion of literary themes and topics from a cross-cultural perspective. Cultural incommensurability is an absolute global claim that rules out the possibility of comparison between East and West" (p. 5-6).

As a matter of fact, if we claim that two cultures are so far apart, so idiosyncratic in their own worldviews, that this incommensurable difference would preclude any effort of building bridges and establishing dialogues between them, not only East-West studies would become untenable, but also any comparative approach would become idle, for the results would always be the same, tautologically reinforcing the initial notion of cultural incommensurability. However, this notion has been so pervasive that we can say that, at the level of commonplace ideas, cultural incommensurability is taken at face value.

(Bouvard and Pecuchet would not do any better as comparatists.)

How to respond to this obvious outcome of cultural differences, that nonetheless are undeniable? Zhang Longxi's strategy must be stressed. He starts by turning the idea against itself: cultural incommensurability is grounded in seemingly unsurmountable differences between, let us say, East and West. But what happens if we turn the argument upside down? That is, if Eastern and Western worldviews are so distant from each other, then, it also must mean that, taken separately, those worldviews are in themselves so homogenous that, within them, difference is replaced by absolute identity. It is only because I have a crystal-clear notion of what "West" is that I can distinguish it radically from the "East;" Western and Eastern cultures would then form a compact block of identical features. Cultural incommensurability, as we finally come to understand it, is a by-product of a previous concept, namely, the internal homogeneity of a given culture.

This intellectual displacement is decisive! If we can show that within East and West themselves *there are also remarkable differences*, the whole argument of cultural incommensurability seems to collapse. Let us listen to Zhang's observations concerning this crucial issue. The first time this idea surfaces is in the preface: "Of course, differences in language and culture do exist, but they exist within one culture as much as between or among cultures" (p. IX). In the first chapter, the idea is once more emphasized and further enhanced, providing the critique of cultural untranslatability as well as an insightful alternative for cross-cultural studies:

> The fact is that similarities and differences exist everywhere, within one culture as well as between or among cultures. Although an understanding of different cultures is often difficult and imperfect, it has always a chance in human communication. The inference must be that cultures are not and cannot be totally incommensurable or untranslatable. Global claims of cultural incommensurability are very often gross exaggerations. (p. 17).

This is an important passage. It would make no sense to deny or even to relativize a fact, which is inseparable of the nature of language and thus of the human condition, namely "understanding of different cultures is often difficult and imperfect." However, imagining that such a difficulty necessarily means that communication is impossible or simply does not take place, is an overreaction to a structural problem, inherent to the human condition itself. Instead of assuming that, for example, a Brazilian and a Chinese will not be able to understand each other given the radical differences of their cultural backgrounds, nothing prevents us from envisaging another road, more precisely, a two-way street, in which, without overlooking obvious differences, we may find some shared concerns and expectations, able to provide a common ground, which, and this point is fundamental, is not anything we can take for

granted but rather a cultural construct. In Zhang's felicitous title, it is a matter of opening one's mind to be available to be exposed to *Unexpected Affinities*. This mental openness may produce surprising effects: "reading across cultures does enable us to appreciate world literature with a spirit of openness and sympathetic understanding" (p. 45).

In the second chapter, Zhang details his internal critique of the notion of cultural incommensurability:

> In fact, members of the same culture may hold very different views and argue with one another, while agreement may sometimes come from people far away or long ago, living under very different cultural and social conditions. Indeed, sometimes we may find Shakespeare closer in spirit to the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming than to his fellow countryman Henry Vaughan, enveloped in an intense Christian spiritualism. (p. 44).

This is an impressive statement, for it broadens dramatically our critical horizon. Tao Yuanming, one of the most praised poets of the period of the Six Dynasties, also known as the "Poets of the Fields," lived between 365-427. William Shakespeare and Henry Vaughan were contemporaries of the Elizabethan period; the former lived between 1564-1616; the latter, between 1621-1695. We now understand what Zhang Longxi referred to when he proposed in *The Tao and the Logos* that literary hermeneutics devoted to the relationship between East and West would not obey a chronological order of simultaneous occurrences but would rather focus on structural (and unexpected) affinities.

There was also another uncanny connection brought about by Zhang Longxi. We are still with the Chinese poet: "Tao Yuanming (365-427) a great poet in fourth-century China, wrote about his simple life in the country and his quiet contemplation of nature" (p.19). His most famous poem touches upon a theme that can be found in philosophical as well as religious systems: how to be sure to find the proper words to convey an absolute truth? It is worth transcribing a quote that sums up Zhang's method:

> If Tao Yuanming felt that truth could only be grasped by the mind, but not expressed in language, isn't that close to what Plato meant when he remarked that concrete things are 'only images,' that what is perceived as true realities 'can be seen only by the mind'? (…) I am of course not suggesting that there is no difference between Plato and Zhuangzi or Tao Yuanming, but they do share the idea that language is inadequate for speaking about the true reality of things. (p. 20).

Here we come to another fundamental stone of the critical edifice built by Zhang Longxi: one can only propose such parallels based on "different works and texts; indeed, cultural encounters will manifest themselves *in* and *as* textual encounters" (p. 7). That is, ambitious cross-cultural readings, as the ones proposed by Zhang Longxi in *Unexpected Affinities* demand *textual evidence*.

The panorama is not yet complete. We have seen that a striking agreement may be found between writers and thinkers from radically different cultural backgrounds, a circumstance which already calls into question the notion of cultural incommensurability. But what if we can clearly show that within one and the same culture also remarkable and sometimes irreducible differences may also be identified? Let us listen to Zhang's reflections:

> In China, the Confucian emphasis on the efficacy of rites and protocols in moral conduct and political governance is definitely different from the Taoist advocacy of non-action or non-interference in the natural course of things, and also different from the Buddhist belief in effect of karma and afterlife, aspirations from nirvana out of the cycle of life and suffering, or life as suffering. (p. XI).

It would be an easy task to prepare an endless list of similar differences within Western culture or within one specific country. I will only mention one case, because it resembles Chinese attitudes concerning the need of modernizing the country after the Opium Wars. Think of Russia in the 19th century, when the country faced a sometimes-traumatic process of modernization and industrialization amidst a countryside immersed in feudal or semi-feudal social, political and economic relations. The Russian intelligentsia was diametrically opposed in two sides. One the one hand, the Slavophiles defended that the Russian empire should be developed according to the early history of the country instead of accepting the superiority of Western values. On the other hand, the Westerners, as the name already clarifies, strongly defended a complete assimilation of ideas, institutions and values from Europe to promote a profound reform of the Russian state and social life. Indeed, this movement dates to the 17th century, during the modernizing period of the Tsar Peter the Great, who reigned from 1672 to 1725, and was strengthened during the reign of Catherine the Great, who was in power from 1762 to 1796. There was an authentic cultural abyss between Slavophiles and Westerners, that is, within one and the same culture! Similar cases could easily be found in virtually every single national culture.

Clearing this path, let us see how Zhang Longxi developed a keen methodology to deepen his critique of cultural incommensurability, an accomplishment which allowed him to propose a new theoretical framework.

Textual encounters as critical evidence

In the beginning of the preface, Zhang Longxi hints at the uniqueness of his approach and, in a certain sense, announces the main hypothesis behind his latest book, *World Literature as Discovery*.

> (…) texts discussed in this book go beyond the boundaries of the West and are discussed from the perspective of East-West studies. In a way, this creates a considerable challenge because the very attempt at East-West comparative studies is more often than not viewed with suspicion, if not dismissed outright as untenable. (p. VIII-IX).

How to overcome this suspicion? Zhang's keen strategy consists in offering a plethora of *textual evidence*:

> Following the spirit of Borges's imaginary criticism and Frye's generous, encyclopedic vision, I shall try to show the connectedness of literatures East and West through an organized demonstration of textual details. The meeting or encounter of cultures East and West will be shown to happen in very different works and texts; indeed, cultural encounters will manifest themselves *in* and *as* textual encounters. (p. 7).

Sun Tzu would be proud! This particular "Art of War" against cultural incommensurability faces the challenge upfront. If it states that no meaningful comparison between the literary traditions of East and West is possible or even fruitful, Zhang deliberately resorts to several and poignant literary examples from both traditions precisely to show that not only parallels can be established but also and, above all, that such parallels propitiate nothing less than the fostering of a new way of reading across cultures. In the first chapter, symptomatically we read: "But let me conclude the discussion of truth with a literary example" (p. 19). We have already mentioned the example: the fourth-century poet Tao Yuanming, whose understanding of poetry as well as of the nature of language allowed Zhang Longxi to find an uncanny affinity between the Chinese poet and the Greek philosopher Plato.

The second chapter takes off resorting to the same method, an authentic guerrilla warfare against the defenders of cultural incommensurability: "My intention was to clear the way for East-West studies, and having done so, I would like now to go into discussions of literary themes across East and West, to engage in what I call textual and cultural encounters through concrete examples" (p. 29). Some key terms must be emphasized here: *literary themes across*, *concrete examples*. This is the litmus test for Zhang's approach, namely, if he can come up with a series of concrete literary examples, used as hard evidence, to demonstrate that reading across cultures is not only possible but also a precondition for fostering insights that otherwise would not be easily accessible, or perhaps not accessible at all. The second chapter is closed with a strong statement: "This is certainly a new sort of metaphorical use of the image of the pearl, no longer linked to tears or dewdrops. We can substantiate this claim with textual evidence" (p. 49). *Textual evidence*: the expression could not be any clearer, but if we still needed to clarify its meaning, we can resort to a homage Zhang Longxi pays to his friend and mentor:

> With a wealth of concrete examples from both Chinese and Western sources, Qian makes a convincing case for the prevalence of this idea in world literature and, most interestingly for our purposes here, he gathers through a number of texts that express his idea by using the image of the pearl. (p. 52).

In the conclusion of the third chapter an idea is outlined, which will be fully unfolded in the fourth and last chapter. Let us then rescue the idea of a truly *unexpected affinity* with Zhang's unique approach:

> Such textual encounters clearly demonstrate the unexpected affinities of ideas and expressions in very different literary and cultural traditions. To understand different texts in depth requires situating them in their own specific contexts and circumstances, but beyond their differences thematic patterns will emerge to put them in perspective and reveal the surprising similarities in the workings of the human mind, the affinities in imagination and human creativity. (p. 89).

Indeed, the tapestry provided by Zhang Longxi concerning the ambivalence of poison and medicine allowed not only the gathering of an impressive display of textual evidence regarding the undisputable existence of shared common concerns and above all poetic treatments in both Eastern and Western traditions, but also favored the development of a radically new gaze insofar as reading across cultures is concerned: "Sometimes the pleasure of reading across cultures is a sense of discovery, the pleasure of finding unexpected affinities of ideas and expressions in different texts. The greater the difference, the more surprising and more satisfying the affinities will be" (p 63). The pleasure derived from such an approach is an issue given pride of place by Zhang Longxi: "To be able to see beyond the limitations of local and parochial views is always a joy and is valuable in itself" (p. 34). The idea returns as a Baroque *basso continuo*: "When such unexpected coincidence occurs, there is indeed a sense of pleasure in the discovery of surprising similarities in very different texts" (p. 36). However, the pleasure of finding *unexpected affinities* is not only as aesthetic delight, but also an intellectual joy, forged by the possibility of having new insights that could only be brought about by the specific methodology developed by Zhang Longxi. This methodology favors "a new sensibility and a greater appreciation" (p. 53) of literature itself.

In the fourth and last chapter, this approach brought to the fore a fascinating analysis of Emily Dickinson's deservedly celebrated and highly complex poem, whose first line says: "At Half past Three, a single Bird." Zhang proceeds to rescue the rich and diverse history of the dialectic of return and reverse, equally present in the Eastern and Western traditions, and that was given a privileged form, that of the circle of the circumference. Going back and forth both traditions and several centuries, Zhang Longxi can propose a possible and plausible reading of otherwise difficult lines to be interpreted; the poem concludes:

> At Half past Seven, Element
> Nor Implement was seen–
> And Place was there the Presence was,
> Circumference between.

Much ink has been spilt trying to provide an interpretation, especially of the last line. Zhang's methodological reading across cultures offered him a new insight:

> If we now return to Emily Dickinson's poem, which I quoted at the beginning, we may recognize that the fusion of the inside and the outside, self and other, is perhaps exactly what the poet meant by saying that there is no longer the distinction of element and implement, the body or the spirit. (p. 122).

Let us conclude resorting to a decisive passage in which Zhang Longxi spelled out the aftermath of his way of reading beyond the narrow boundaries of cultural relativism:

> In that sense, then, reading across cultures will make it possible for us to see the connection of literary works, to explore poetic images and literary themes with the exciting sense of a new discovery, as though we are seeing and understanding some of the great works of literature for the first time, and in ways that are not available when we are boxed up in the narrow mental space of cultural dichotomy and parochialism. Indeed, reading across cultures will make us better readers. (p. 56).

An ambitious program and a risky promise. But Zhang Longxi has proven that the new theoretical framework he has developed is able to face the challenge, opening a road not yet travelled by.

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A obra de Zhang Longxi e a falácia da incomensurabilidade cultural

Resumo:

Neste artigo, defendo que as contribuições de Zhang Longxi para os estudos literários, em geral, e para a literatura comparada, em particular, oferecem um ponto de partida muito bem-vindo para o desenvolvimento de um novo quadro teórico, capaz de permitir a superação dos impasses resultantes de uma teorização exclusivamente ocidental.

Palavras-chave: *Zhang Longxi; Leitura transcultural; Hermenêutica literária; Oriente e Ocidente; Poética comparada.*